

BINGHAM HALL AND THE PORTER FAMILY: A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE ‘DESERTED MEDIEVAL VILLAGE’ AT CROW CLOSE, BINGHAM, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

by

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INTRODUCTION

Some 3000 sites of so-called deserted medieval villages (DMVs) have now been identified in England – especially in the Midlands – mainly through air photography. They are categorised by features fossilized in pastoral landscapes in the form of house platforms, hollow ways, field boundaries and ridge-and-furrow cultivation.

It was originally thought that most such desertions were the result of the Black Death – the devastating plague outbreak of 1348–49. Certainly there is widespread contemporary evidence both of buildings subsequently described as ‘waste’ and of arable land being converted to pasture because of the absence of labour to till the soil, but it now seems unlikely that the plague would have wiped out whole villages. Some sites that have been excavated, (eg Wharram Percy in east Yorkshire, Goltho in Lincolnshire, Barton Blount in Derbyshire, and Ulnaby in County Durham), suggest that such settlements often shrank slowly over time until reduced to a handful of houses and farms or even none altogether. It is now recognised that there were many factors that could contribute to shrinkage or desertion during both the medieval and modern periods, such as recurring out-breaks of plague down to 1666, the enclosure of arable land for more profitable pasture or for hunting and pleasure parks, as well as natural events such as rising or falling water tables.

The ‘deserted medieval village’ under investigation here lies in Crow Close, a large (17 acre) pasture field on the eastern edge of Bingham, a market town bordered by the Roman Fosse

Way and situated some ten miles to the east of Nottingham. Between 2004 and 2010 the Bingham Heritage Trails Association (BHTA) obtained a Heritage Lottery Grant to undertake archaeological field walking of some 2000 acres of arable farmland within Bingham parish.¹

The project also included detailed topographic and geophysical surveys (but not excavation) of the earthworks in Crow Close and a documentary study of its history from surviving archives. Although it has long been assumed that Crow Close is a deserted medieval village it has not been dated. The reasons for its desertion have not been explored; neither have alternative explanations for the earthworks been considered.

CROW CLOSE: SURVIVING EARTHWORKS

Crow Close is about 800 metres from Bingham Market Place and 550 metres from the parish church. The field is surrounded on three sides by modern housing. At the eastern end is Carnarvon Primary School. The north-western corner of Crow Close has been developed as a playground with minimal disruption to the earthworks and other features.

The field is a scheduled monument, number 29905, and was first listed in the schedule on 3rd March 1956. It is owned by the Diocese of Southwell Board of Finance and is rented out for grazing cattle. Currently (2012), the estate agents Jas Martin & Co, 8, Bank Street, Lincoln, LN2 1DS act on behalf of the Diocese.

The earthworks here were the first in England to be archaeologically identified and described as a DMV site, by Hadrian Allcroft in 1907 (although this possibility had been noted by Bingham chronicler Andrew Esdaile in 1851 who wrote that here were ‘many lanes and sites of streets and buildings’).²

Topographically, the field is a low-lying spur falling away to the north, east and, less markedly, the south. The spur is Triassic Hollygate Sandstone, a geological formation that extends westwards through the centre of Bingham.³ The flat areas to the north and east of the spur are deposits of clay laid down in a post-glacial lake. To the south lies mudstone of the Triassic Edwalton Formation. Most of the features that are possibly indicative of housing are on the area of sandstone

The earthworks mapped by Allcroft have since been plotted by air photography (Plates 1–5) No archaeological investigations have ever been carried out on this site. However when the playground was created in the north west corner in 1974 a few sherds of medieval pottery were found in the small holes made for the erection of play equipment. Similar pottery was found in a pipe trench dug along the southern boundary of the field.⁴ Excavations prior to the erection of the new Carnarvon Primary School at the east end of the field in 1968 revealed evidence of a possible Roman villa in the vicinity but only two sherds of medieval pottery.⁵ More recently three archaeological test pits on the same location excavated by BHTA in 2012 confirmed strong Roman but minimal medieval presence here.

Crow Close is best seen in winter when the grass is short and the surviving earthworks are most impressive. Air photographs appear to show a road or hollow way (a sunken road with embankments on both sides) running west-east from a junction with Cogley Lane at the western end of the field to the centre. This follows the line of one of Bingham’s oldest main streets – Church Street continuing as East Street (the churchyard appears to have encroached onto the street in the late 1600s) – and then on a course still approximately marked by footpaths through a modern housing estate to cross Cogley Lane into the hollow way (Fig. 1).

Esdaile noted in 1851 that the Bingham overseer of the highways always repaired the road ‘up to the entrance of this close, the same as he does the streets, although it may be said to be out of the town’.

A second hollow way, more or less at right angles to this one, crosses the middle of the field. Several small rectangular fields with ditches for boundaries are arranged off the hollow ways. In the middle is a roughly triangular area that has been interpreted as a ‘village green’. Small rectangular structures thought to mark the sites of houses can be seen along the hollow ways and around the ‘green’. Two larger rectangular structures, also probably buildings, lie along the south eastern side of it.

Historical Context

The earliest map to identify Crow Close by name is the Bingham tithe map and schedule of 1842⁶ (although the same outline boundaries are shown on Sanderson’s printed map of 1835, Fig 2).⁷ It was then owned and occupied by local farmer William Pacey, being one of the few examples of freehold farmland not owned by the Stanhope family, Earls of Chesterfield, the principal owners of nearly all of Bingham since 1591.

Crow Close does not feature in the Earls of Chesterfield’s written survey of their Bingham property in 1776 nor in an extremely detailed survey of 1586 compiled for the previous owners, the Stapleton family.⁸ It seems reasonable to suppose that for centuries it was independently owned freehold land, which could be a significant key to understanding its history. Unfortunately, apart from the 1586 survey, from which a conjectural map of the parish with its four open arable fields has been compiled by BHTA⁹, other early estate archives of the Stanhopes do not appear to have survived.

The earliest description of the site is by Andrew Esdaile in a short pamphlet on Bingham history published in 1851 (but possibly written earlier). He was a Scottish watchmaker and bobbin-net lace manufacturer who settled first in Bottesford and then Bingham and was buried at Langar.¹⁰ He states



PLATE 1: Crow Close : aerial view from the east, c.1957. Cogley Lane runs north-south across the picture, forming the western boundary of the close. Bingham Market Place can be distantly seen top centre, linked to Crow Close by winding streets and footpaths. *Cambridge University Collection of Air Photographs, Unit for Landscape Modelling.*

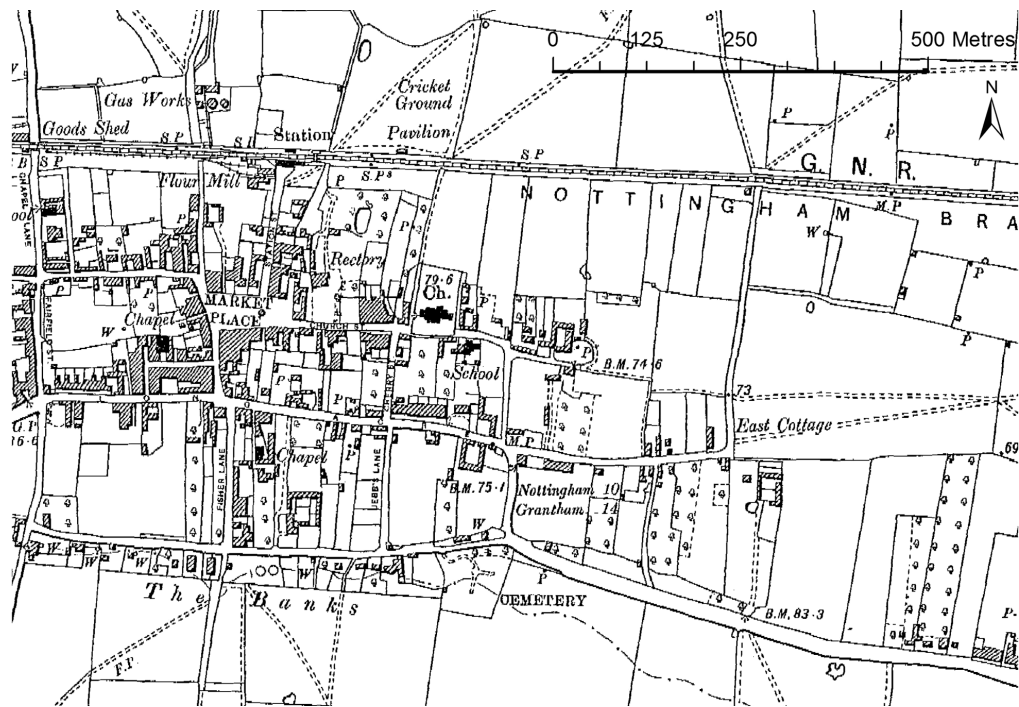


FIGURE 1: Bingham in 1905. Crow Close is the rectangular field containing the name 'East Cottage'. The route from the Market Place along Church Street leads past the church via streets and footpath to cross Cogley Lane (spot height 73) into Crow Close. From here its course follows the hollow way shown on Plate 1. *Ordnance Survey 1:10,000, 1915.*

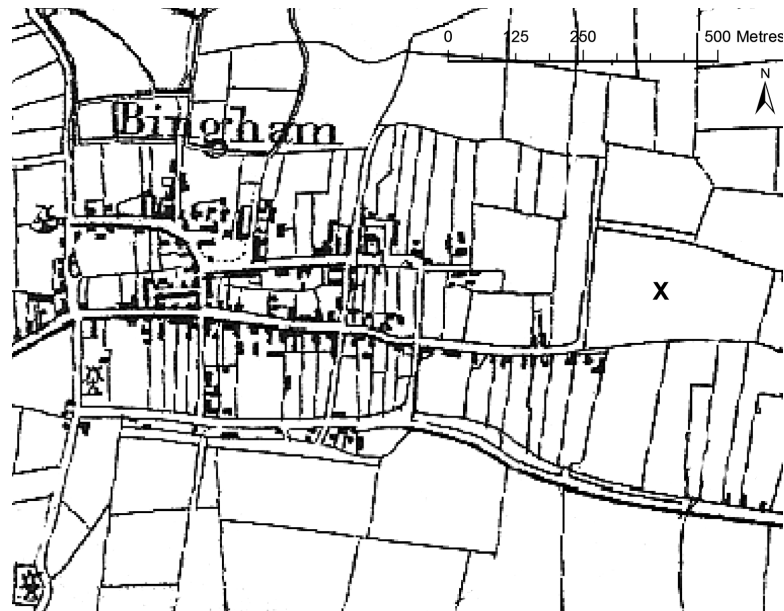


FIGURE 2: Bingham in 1835. Crow Close is marked X. Detail from George Sanderson, *Map of the Country Twenty Miles Round Mansfield*, 1835.

that in Crow Close were ‘many lanes and sites of streets and buildings; a large square somewhat higher than the rest we think is the churchyard’. He confirmed that Crow Close ‘formed no part’ of the Chesterfield estate but ‘was the Porter Estate’ owned by the local Porter family of freeholders.

He speculated that this ‘square’ may have been the site of a former lost chapel of St James’. As this would have been at the east end of Bingham and there was another ancient chapel called St Helen’s to the west he suggested these could have served separate lost hamlets. Later writers such as Adelaide Wortley claimed that stones robbed from St James’s had been used to complete the building of the parish church, and that the original Norman font (restored to the church in 1926) may also have come from there.¹¹ However it now appears that there was no such chapel of St James’, the confusion having arisen from a scribal error in an Elizabethan document relating to the well-documented chapel of St Helen’s; it can thus be discounted from further consideration. The evidence for this error is discussed in the Appendix below.

Wortley also repeated conflicting local oral traditions that Crow Close was the site of a Civil War encampment as well as ‘the site of old Bingham which was probably destroyed by a hurricane’; both stories were no doubt a case of popular rationalisation of unexplained phenomena.¹²

Topographic and Geophysical Surveys

Air Photography and Laser Survey

Several air photographs of Crow Close taken after the Second World War show the earthworks in various degrees of detail (Plates 1–5).¹³ Many of the features have become degraded with time.

A topographic survey was carried out in March 2005 by Dr Kate Strange of *3D Laser Mapping* of Bingham using a Riegl 3D Imaging Sensor LMS-Z210. This is a high performance long-range 3D laser scanner linked to a high-resolution digital camera. The data were processed using RiSCAN PRO software, which offers a range of outputs. The

one thought to provide the most useful information is a grey-scale intensity view, which produces an image that simulates a scale-true air photograph. It has been fitted to the Ordnance Survey 1:10,000 topographic map (Fig 3).

Among the air photographs the most striking view is from the east (Plate 2), which has been manipulated to increase contrast. Here a group of seven ring structures is seen at the western end of the field. The one on the far right (north), which has a white central area, is known to have been a pond. Of the remaining six only two were picked up on the laser survey leaving the rest unexplained. Viewed from the west (Plate 3) two more circular structures are visible on either side of the hedge that separates Crow Close from what is now the playing field of Carnarvon School. The cluster at the western end of Crow Close is not so clearly visible on this view.

The view from the north east (Plate 4) shows the earthworks most clearly. This image has been modified to reduce contrast and is the only one that shows ridge and furrow in the eastern part of the field. Compared with all the available air photographs the laser image (Fig 3) shows all the major elements of the structures, but they are less clearly defined, almost certainly because of degradation during the time interval since the pictures were taken. Despite this the laser image shows the main features well.

Three hollow ways are evident meeting in a confused area in the middle of the field. The east-west hollow way is a continuation of roads and tracks that lead from the present-day parish church. The two that are approximately north-south are confined to within the field, their extensions having been concealed by modern housing. A number of rectangular fields marked by ditched boundaries are arranged more or less at right angles to the hollow ways. There is one central triangular field with a small irregular shaped area bounded by a hollow way and ditched boundaries to the east of it.

Ridge and furrow is clearly illustrated. In most of the small fields it is approximately parallel to the ditched boundaries, but the northern boundary of the south eastern corner field appears to intersect the



PLATE 2: View from east, with enhanced contrast.

PLATES 2–5: Aerial Photographs of Crow Close c 1957.
Cambridge University Collection of Air Photographs.



PLATE 3. View from west, with Cogley Lane in foreground



PLATE 4: View from north east, with enhanced contrast.



PLATE 5: View from east north east.

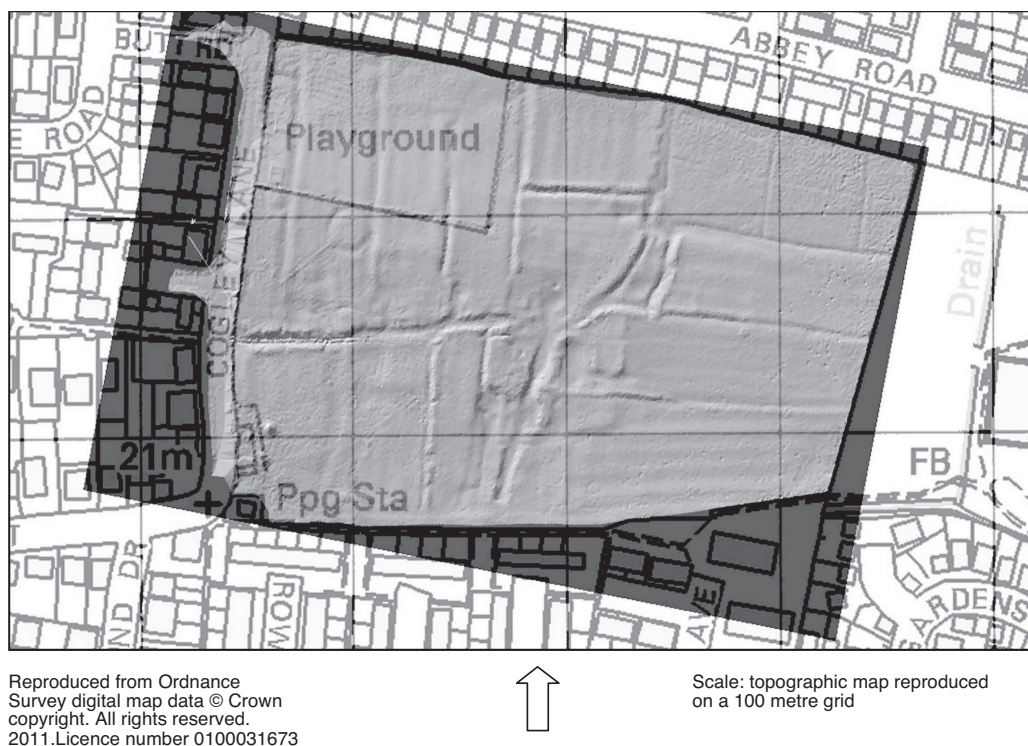


FIGURE 3: Crow Close : Topographic Laser image imposed onto modern OS 1: 10,000 map.

ridge and furrow. Two large, rectangular structures that appear to be the remains of large buildings are visible and there are several small rectangular structures, which may also be the remains of buildings. Abutting the southern boundary of the playground is a circular structure with a perfectly straight lineament projecting south-westwards from it. To the south of it, on the edge of the hollow way is another smaller, circular structure.

The most prominent structures indicative of buildings are the two large structures (Fig 6: P). The southern of the two is rather less clear than its neighbour, but appears almost square and measures approximately 18 m across. The northern one, which is much more sharply defined and appears on air photographs to be a stone structure, measures 26 x 13 m. and probably equates to Esdaile's 'large square' which he thought might be the site of the mysterious chapel of 'St James' (see Appendix). However both of these are oriented north-south and thus cannot be ecclesiastical in origin. They also appear too big to be medieval farmsteads.

Geophysical Survey

Geophysical surveys were carried out in a selected part of the field by Grid Nine Geophysics of Grantham. A Level II Evaluation geophysical survey¹⁴ using fluxgate gradiometer and earth resistance techniques was chosen as the most appropriate type of survey for the site. The magnetic survey was carried out using a Bartington Grad601-2 Dual Fluxgate Gradiometer with an onboard automatic DL601 data logger. The earth resistance survey was carried out with a TR Systems Earth Resistance Meter using the standard twin probe array and an on-board automatic data logger.

The magnetometer and resistance surveys (Figs.4-5) were found to be complementary, measuring different structures, but when combined were very informative. A composite interpretation of both together overlain on the topographic map is shown in Fig. 6. Many of the structures visible on the air photographs are revealed by the geophysics, but some are not. Among the most striking features



FIGURE 4: Crow Close : Geophysical Magnetometer image.

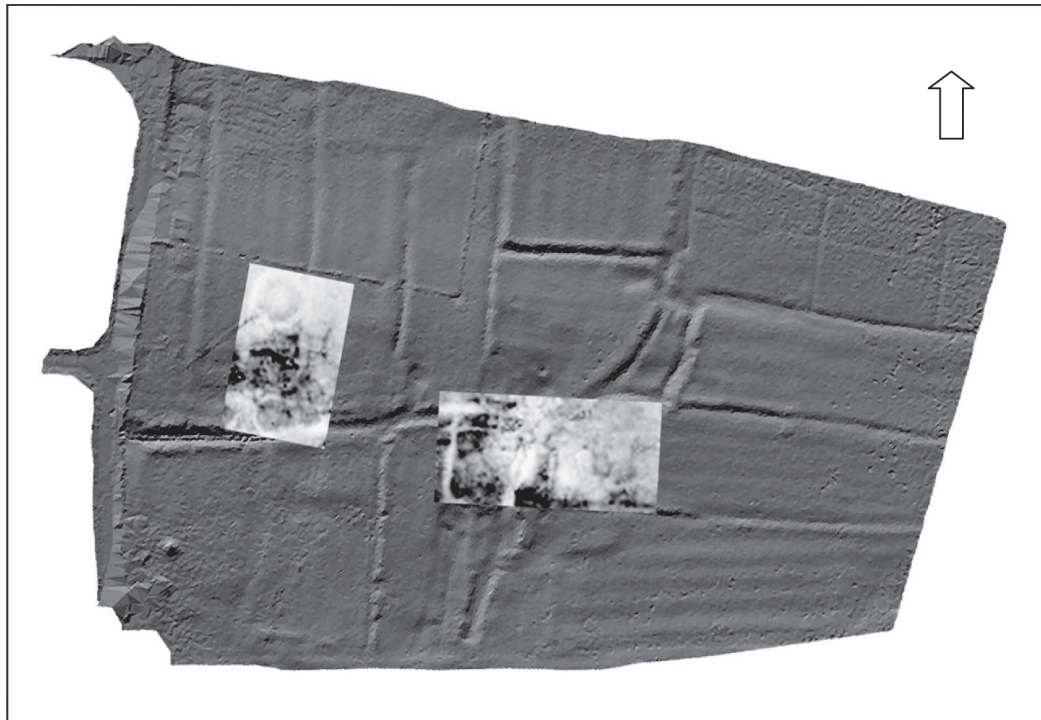


FIGURE 5: Crow Close : Geophysical Resistance image.

seen on the laser survey map and the geophysics is the previously unnoticed ridge and furrow. In the south eastern part of Crow Close one of the ditched boundaries lies obliquely to the ridge and furrow and cuts across the southern of the two large building structures. Several structures thought to be indicative of buildings were picked out by the geophysics, but some noticed on air photographs were not. These clearly need further investigation.

A detailed description of the geophysical interpretation can be found on the BHTA website.¹⁵

Interpretation of the Physical Elements (Fig 6)

World War II Features

The most surprising discovery was of World War II installations in fields B and C. Among them were a 20 metre-diameter searchlight unit, a possible artillery stand, a service trench and areas of patterned rubble that probably indicate the sites of wartime buildings. Once identified the earthworks associated with these structures could be excluded from the study of the earlier features.

Of the ring structures that show on the air photographs only two at the Cogley Lane (west) end of the field show on the laser survey and they both give geophysical anomalies. The northern one abutting the playground area has a 'panhandle' trending south westwards and has both magnetic and resistance anomalies (Figs 4–5). In size, design and configuration of the geophysical anomalies it is consistent with the standard design for searchlight units built in the late 1930s in defensive rings around the major cities in Britain.¹⁶ The unit at Crow Close would have been part of a 12-mile radius ring as well as serving to cover Newton airfield. Each unit had a circular defensive mound up to 60 feet in diameter surrounded by a ditch, both of which have an earth resistance signature, and a central sunken area up to 20 feet in diameter, where the searchlight was set. The defensive mound was shored up around the sunken area with corrugated iron sheeting, which would explain the circular positive magnetic anomaly seen here. A linear magnetic anomaly forming the 'panhandle'

is probably a cast iron drainpipe used to keep the sunken area dry after rain.

The smaller mound to the south is marked as an amorphous magnetic area indicative of ferrous or highly fired material surrounded by an apparently hexagonal or octagonal low resistance linear anomaly, which could be a wall or a ditch. This structure might have been a gun emplacement, but the local residents interviewed remember both a searchlight unit and Nissen huts on Crow Close during the Second World War, but do not remember seeing or hearing a gun here. There is no central circular, positive magnetic anomaly similar to the one to the north. A linear magnetic anomaly running to the west from it could be caused by buried corrugated iron sheeting and mark the site a slit trench. These were added to searchlight units in 1941.¹⁷

The area between these two circular structures is characterised by amorphous high resistance features, thought to indicate spreads of rubble or compacted surfaces and may be the site of one or more of the wartime buildings.

Three of the circular structures visible near Cogley Lane at the west (Plates 2–3) neither appear on the laser survey nor as geophysical anomalies, though they are thought most likely to be World War II structures. The two circular structures either side of the hedge that marks the boundary between Crow Close and Carnarvon School playing field at the east superficially resemble the structures near the Cogley Lane end of the field and may also have originated in World War II. They were not included within the area covered by the geophysical surveys.

Amorphous areas of high and very high resistance anomalies in the area to the east (M) could be rubble spreads, but the absence of any signs of World War II structures here on the air photographs suggests that they are more likely to be from an earlier period.

Ridge and furrow

Extant ridge and furrow may be observed on the laser plan as a series of broad, low, linear

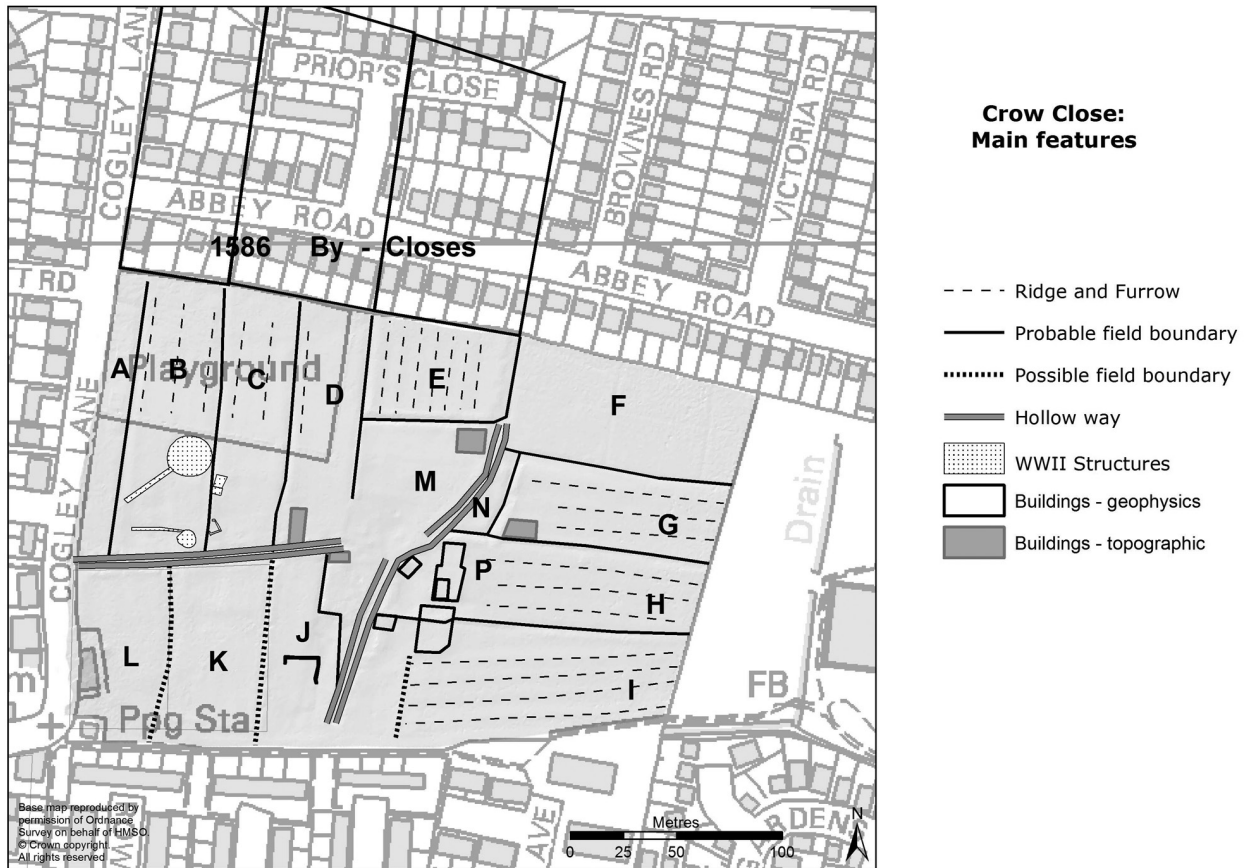


FIGURE 6: Crow Close : Composite interpretation plan. The letters indicate former enclosures – called ‘fields’ in the text.

earthworks running approximately west-east across fields G, H and I in the eastern part of Crow Close and running approximately north-south in fields B, C, D and E in the northern part. Where covered by the geophysical survey these earthworks correlate closely with broad positive and negative linear striations in the magnetometer plot, but are invisible in the earth resistance plot.

Hollow ways

The substantial surviving earthworks of the hollow ways that converge towards the centre of Crow Close emerge clearly in the magnetometer plots as wide bands of disturbed magnetic response though there might be some interference from the WW II activity in the western parts. The courses of the hollow ways may also be partially tracked on the basis of variations in earth resistance, reflecting

fluctuations in the moisture content of associated banks and ditches. However, detail is lost where the hollow ways converge and the geophysics suggests there may be spreads of rubble from later buildings here.

Field and property boundaries

The laser plan shows clearly a rectilinear pattern of ditched boundaries, sometimes flanked by low banks, extending across the entire field. They define at least fourteen smaller fields. These features are of uncertain date, but many appear to have been appended to the hollow ways. Linear boundaries between fields B to E appear to be parallel to the ridge and furrow. On the ground the ridge and furrow is difficult to measure and no conclusions can be made about the chronological relationships between the ridge and furrow and these boundaries.

The boundary between fields H and I cuts across the southernmost of several low, sub-rectangular earthworks that might mark the locations of building platforms and is not parallel to the ridge and furrow. This suggests that the boundary post-dates both the ridge and furrow and the possible building platform. Also in this area the ridge and furrow in fields G and I ends abruptly at north-south geophysical anomalies suggesting some later, possibly post-medieval activity.

Field F in the north-eastern part of Crow Close is difficult to interpret. The laser plan does not show any distinct ridge and furrow and while the southern and western boundaries appear to be ditches the field itself is divided up into six parts by relatively straight features visible both on the laser plan and the air photographs. These could be younger than any other boundaries in the field. The two at the eastern end of this field appear to be truncated by the modern field boundaries, which are present on the title map of 1841–42, but there is no earlier information about them.

Where covered by the geophysical surveys most of the linear boundaries on the laser plan correlate with linear magnetic anomalies although some extant earthworks did not show on the magnetometry. Conversely, the magnetometer survey also identified a number of boundaries that are not clearly discernible on the laser plot, notably in the area of field C. The earth resistance survey failed to locate the linear ditches recorded by laser and magnetometer survey in the western survey block, but recorded two linear features in the eastern survey area that were detected by neither the laser nor the magnetometer survey.

The boundary between fields K and L is a broad, slightly curved depression visible on the laser plan and air photographs. A dendritic set of linear positive magnetic anomalies partly coincides with this depression, which is unlike any of the other responses to ditched boundaries. These are the only two fields in Crow Close for which there is other evidence of their existence. In 1586 most of Crow Close was freehold land and therefore not covered by the survey, but these two closes were owned by the lord of the manor and are shown on the 1586

conjectural map in the south west corner fronting onto the hollow way. The one in the corner (L) was probably the plot called ‘The Grene’ and rented by Robert Simpson; the one to the east of it (K) was leased to Nicholas Selby. Significantly, the 1586 manorial survey describes this one as bounded by ‘free land’ owned by Robert Porter to the east. They may have been separated by a hedge, rather than a ditch and bank, giving an entirely different geophysical response to the other boundaries.

The boundaries of the small fields within Crow Close clearly date from more than one period. The results summarised above emphasise the complementary nature of magnetometry and earth resistance. Together with the laser data, they suggest a complex sequence of landscape change spanning the medieval and post-medieval periods. Documentary and cartographic research might clarify the chronological relationships of the various land allotment features revealed during survey, but ultimately only excavation might unravel the complex sequences.

Building platforms

The laser plan and air photographs reveal denuded and poorly defined sub rectangular earthworks, focused upon the junction between the hollow ways that might conceal the foundations of buildings. The two largest, situated close to the north-south hollow way in the south eastern quadrant, were both verified by geophysics. The magnetic and resistance anomalies did not always coincide, but seemed to be reacting to different properties within each building. In one case a small rectangular resistance anomaly was situated within the larger magnetic anomaly, possibly marking the site of a room. The southernmost of the two large ones (P) which is approximately 18 metres square, appears to have been truncated by a west-east linear boundary, which is oblique to the ridge and furrow in Field I, but providing no other obvious stratigraphical relationships that would assist dating. Distinctive earthworks visible on air photographs immediately to the north of this seem to be the southern part of a building measuring 13metres by 26 metres although the data are not easily interpreted. Several other magnetic anomalies correlate with earthwork

features, some of sub rectangular shape and could be structural remains of buildings or associated ditches. No anomalies displaying magnetic signatures diagnostic of hearths or kilns were recorded, but several localised positive magnetic anomalies might signify pits or areas of burning.

The two large buildings (P) verified by geophysics are more likely to be the remains of substantial high status houses than medieval farmhouses with the possibility that the two are of different ages. The smaller structures nearby may be part of a complex of farm buildings associated with a high status house. Evidence for anything that could be interpreted as medieval farmhouses is lacking in the geophysics. Four sites visible on air photographs and the laser plan situated around the central triangular field M are possible house platforms, but they have no geophysics signature and would have to be investigated by excavation. From this it is difficult to conclude that the verified remains are indicative of a medieval village. A more likely interpretation is that this is the site of a small high status house and associated estate buildings, which may be medieval in origin. Other places in the central area have geophysical responses indicating extensive spreads of rubble suggesting the collapsed remains of buildings.

Discussion

The physical features do not unequivocally support the interpretation of the earthworks as being representative of a deserted medieval village. The boundaries of the internal small fields are disposed symmetrically with respect to the hollow ways and there is evidence that several of them existed in Tudor and later times. Boundaries shown between fields B and C and D and E both have been interpreted as extending northwards out of Crow Close to coincide with the boundaries between by-closes shown on the conjectural map for 1596. Similarly, fields K and L coincide with closes known to exist in 1586. The boundary between fields H and I truncates a building platform and is not parallel to the ridge and furrow in field I. Ridge and furrow in fields B, C, D, E, G H and I all end abruptly. In fields B, C and D they may be truncated by World War II features, but in the other fields they

appear to end at possible building platforms around the central area where the hollow ways intersect. The weight of evidence seems to support a post-medieval date for the field boundaries and hollow ways.

In putting a date to the rectangular fields some guidance is provided by three boundaries A-D visible in the modern playground in the north western part of Crow Close. Air photographs (Plates 1 & 5) show that they extend northwards beyond the current boundary of Crow Close into two closes that existed in 1586. One of them is the boundary between these two closes; the other two are not and are clearly later. Because these fields are arranged so regularly with respect to the hollow ways it appears that they were all put in at the same time. This would have to be after 1586 and the most likely date is during the general enclosure of the parish in c. 1680–90. At this time the two small closes in the south western part of Crow Close and the three on the north west could have changed ownership.

Possible Reasons for Shrinkage or Desertion of the buildings complex

Assuming that there may be concealed evidence of medieval as well as post-medieval occupation of the site it is necessary to examine the documentary evidence for the existence of the settlement in this location and possible historical reasons for the desertion of the site.

Shrinkage caused by plague

Crow Close may have been an eastern extension of the Bingham town abandoned after the population was decimated by the Black Death of 1348–49 or one of the recurring outbreaks of plague in Nottinghamshire in 1592–93, 1605, 1637 and 1646. Throughout England during the Black Death between a third and a half of the population died (probably including Sir William de Bingham, the lord of Bingham manor). Nearby a survey of the Belvoir Castle estates in 1352 records that some 360 acres had fallen out of cultivation in this way.¹⁸ Nationally many decayed holdings remained empty well into the 15th century, although the evidence of

the taxation rebates allowed in the 1440s shows that Bingham's rebate was only just over 6%, suggesting it had largely recovered from any earlier losses.¹⁹ A rental of the manor in 1450 lists over 25 freehold holdings and over 60 tenanted holdings with no mention of decayed properties.²⁰ Shortage of labour after a later outbreak of plague might have left the landowner no option but to amalgamate farm holdings, perhaps resulting in the abandonment of those farms and cottages at the farthest end of the town. Bingham certainly suffered in 1637 and again in 1646 when forty six people are recorded in the parish register as dying from the disease.²¹

Migration resulting from the creation of a medieval 'new' town and market

The only physical evidence of the existence of a settlement at the present centre of Bingham is the parish church, begun in the early 13th century, although the font is of a design that dates it to around 1100. There is no mention of a church in Domesday Book, though this does not mean that there was not one. Since Anglo-Saxon times Bingham had been the head of one of the six administrative 'wapentakes' (also known as 'hundreds') into which the county was subdivided, and by 1291 at least it was also the head of the Bingham Deanery, a similar ecclesiastical subdivision, and was thus a place of local importance.

The completion of the parish church by the early 1300s is likely to have been driven by the lord of the manor, Sir Richard de Bingham. His manor house is thought to have been on the north side of the Market Place where the 1586 survey mentions 'the site of the manor ... which is now in decay and ruinous ... and wasted in all structures except two barns and a dovecote'. Evidence of the truth of this interpretation has been forthcoming in two archaeological test pits dug at the postulated site of the manor house in 2012. Remains were found of a possible floor, about 25 cm thick with medieval pottery above and below it. Sir Richard's widow and son acquired a market charter in 1314 which was probably a formal retrospective acknowledgement of a pre-existing market; he may well have been responsible for the market foundation and the layout

of the Market Place and the present town plan in the preceding decades.

During the 13th century many 'new towns' came into being, some totally new plantations but many extensions or adaptations of existing villages. Such towns were often planned on a grid-iron pattern containing regular-sized farm and cottage plots, and such a plan still survives in essence in Bingham to this day. All the older streets are laid out on an east-west axis linked by lanes at right angles to them (Fig. 7).

The plausible suggestion has been made by Gillian Stroud that the town plan may have been laid out in two phases.²² The first – possibly in the 12th or even 11th century – would have seen Long Acre (including the section now called Long Acre East) laid out as a main east-west street with The Banks as a southern back lane and Church Street continued to the east of the church as East Street as a northern back lane. The theory is supported by the fact that the whole length of Long Acre was called Husband (man's i.e. the farmers') Street in the 1586 survey and contained the bulk of the town's farmhouses, suggesting an element of deliberate functional and social zoning. A similar arrangement in the neighbouring village of East Bridgford where there was a farmers' street (now College Street) and a cottagers' street (Kneeton Road) appears to predate the early 14th century.²³

The second phase would have been part of the 13th century market town development, involving a new market place and adjacent fair ground (called the Fair Close in 1586 and still commemorated to this day by Fairfield Street), thus making Church Street and East Street the new axis of the town, and the adjustment of some other streets and lanes.

Crow Close could thus have been part of an original Anglo-Saxon village stretching from there to the parish church but was abandoned after the layout of the planned market town to the west. However the total length of such a settlement would seem to be excessive, as villages tended to be nucleated around a church.

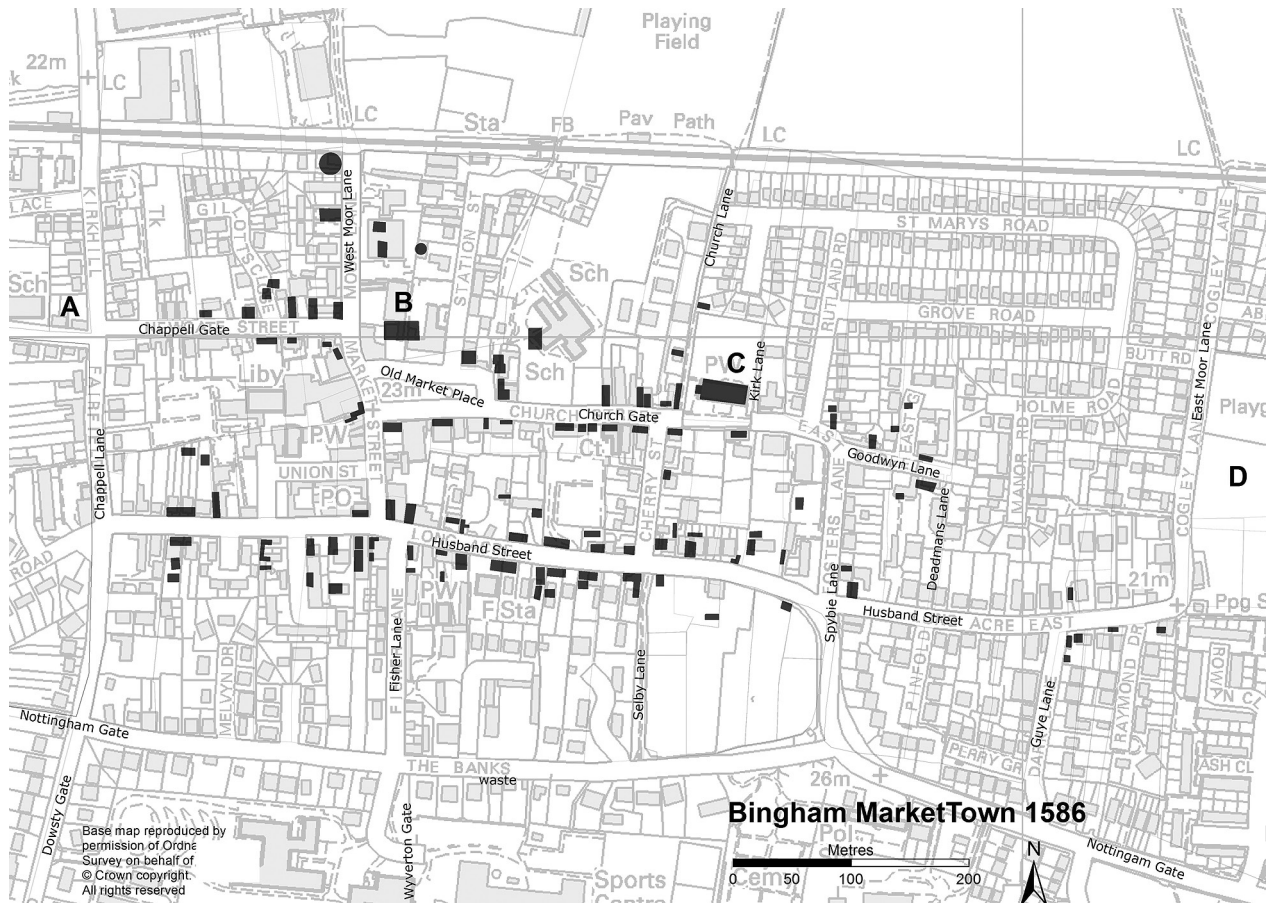


FIGURE 7: Conjectural map of Bingham based on written Survey of 1586.

KEY: A: site of ruined St Helen’s Chapel; B: site of ruined Manor House; C: Parish Church; D: land not covered by the Survey but later known as Crow Close..

Abandonment of a subsidiary manorial centre or outlying farmstead

Domesday Book (1086) records that one large and two small but combined, manorial estates had existed in Bingham in Anglo Saxon times. The larger manor had belonged to Earl Tosti and the smaller ones to Helgi and Hoga.²⁴ After the Conquest all passed to the Norman lord Robert de Builli (and subsequently to the Paynell, de Bingham, Rempstone, Stapleton, and Stanhope families between the 12th and the 19th centuries). No further references suggesting the survival of these subsidiary manors have been discovered to

support a case for Crow Close being a manorial complex of one of them.

However evidence collected by field walking the parish has indicated that several small outlying farms or hamlets may have existed in Bingham parish up to the later middle ages, but they disappeared – probably as a result of a direct policy of nucleation of all the houses into the village centre by the dominant landowner – in the late 15th or early 16th centuries.²⁵ It is thus conceivable that Crow Close was the site of another such settlement but it has not been possible to determine this archaeologically as neither field walking nor excavation has been done there.

The existence of a single independent but non-manorial freehold estate within the parish is however much more likely. Domesday Book records the existence of 14 'sokemen' in the main manor and one in the smaller manors as well as the tenant farmers and unfree men. Sokemen were possibly of Danish descent and were the predecessors of freeholders or 'yeomen', and it seems likely that out of the descendants of this group of people one family – the Porters – emerged pre-eminent, and that Crow Close was the nucleus of their estate.

Such small estates alongside larger ones are not uncommon in adjacent parishes. At East Bridgford in Elizabethan times the Hacker family purchased an existing estate of c. 130 acres centred on what is now called the Old Hall on Kneeton Road; this was independent of the large holdings of two absentee landowners who between them owned all the rest of the parish land.²⁶ At Car Colston the ancestors of the 17th C. historian Dr Thoroton had held a small estate of c.165 acres since medieval times based on Morin Hall (later Hall Farm) facing the Little Green.²⁷

Reorganisation of the town layout and fields by private enclosure agreement in c 1680–90

By the 17th century enclosure was increasingly carried out with the consent of all the landowners in a parish and circumstantial evidence suggests that Bingham's four open fields were enclosed in this manner, probably in c.1680–90. John Throsby in his *History of Nottinghamshire* published in 1797 stated that Bingham had been enclosed 'upwards of 100 years'.²⁸ The Chesterfield Estate survey of 1776 lists many closes bearing the name 'plott' (eg. Toothill Plotts), which is a 17th century word for an allotment or enclosure and is not found in the 1586 survey. The probate inventory of Thomas Maching, chapman of Bingham in 1705 mentions livestock in the 'Flash-plott' and the 'Cheese plott alias Marly-pit plott', suggesting that enclosure had taken place by this date.²⁹ The decision to enclose may partly have been triggered by a rapid decline in population, possibly caused by a local epidemic; an exceptionally high number of burials are recorded in the parish register between 1679 and 1684.³⁰

During this process all the thousands of strips would have been abandoned and the landscape completely reshaped into 'closes' (modern 'fields') in separate occupation. The Earl of Chesterfield and the few freeholders would also have taken the opportunity to exchange land to consolidate their holdings into more compact blocks. In the process some former cottages and crofts on Crow Close may have been cleared away and the land converted to pasture.

Discussion

Shrinkage and desertion of Crow Close as a result of the Black Death seems unlikely, though one of the 17th century outbreaks of plague cannot be ruled out. Desertion resulting from the redesign of the original Anglo-Saxon Bingham does not seem plausible because of the time gap between the date of the new layout (probably 13th C) and the establishment of the field system within Crow Close (Tudor and post-Tudor times). The existence of Crow Close as a subsidiary manor cannot be verified by documentary evidence, but its existence as an independent estate owned by yeomen is realistic. It is also realistic to postulate that Crow Close was reorganised during the late 17th century enclosure of the parish, though it cannot be proved that it was deserted as a result of enclosure. The best fit for the historical and physical evidence suggests that the earthworks of Crow Close represent the remains of the hall/farmhouse and ancillary buildings and possibly estate cottages of a wealthy family of freeholders who owned a substantial quantity of land surrounded by the Chesterfield estate. The evidence for this being the Porter family is examined below.

THE PORTER FAMILY

The Porter family lasted for some 300 years as well-off 'yeomen' farming an estate of about 100–150 acres, a remarkable example of continuity. The earliest reference to them is in a manorial survey of 1450 listing William Porter as the largest freeholder in the township and John Porter having a smaller free holding.³¹ Later, several of them filled minor roles in local administration, for example appearing

on the local juries of official enquiries such as *inquisitions post mortem* (inquests into feudal dues payable after the death of a tenant in chief of the Crown). John Porter served in this capacity in 1476, as did Robert Porter on two occasions in 1503 and Thomas Porter, described as ‘yeoman’, in both 1530 and 1532.³²

The 1586 Survey contains a memorandum that Thomas Porter, grandfather of current landowner Robert, had been a ward of Bryan Stapleton and had sat with him at table at Burton (Joyce) Hall (the Stapletons’ local residence subsidiary to their main seat at Carlton near Selby in Yorkshire). Thomas must have inherited whilst a minor and Stapleton would have enjoyed the management and income of his estates.

Although the Survey does not itemise freehold land in detail except in the description of open field strips, it lists Robert Porter as the largest freeholder in 1586, owning one ‘messuage’ (homestead) and five ‘bovates’ of (arable) land and another five of meadow. There is no indication of the location of his homestead within the town centre or in the west of the parish and therefore by elimination it must have been to the east. It is probably significant that a small close owned by the lord of the manor enclosed out of the south west corner of the modern Crow Close (Fig. 6 :K) was described as bounded by ‘free land of Robert Porter’ to the east.

The survey also indicates that he was in process of extending his estate as he had recently purchased another farm comprising a messuage and three bovates of land and three of meadow formerly in the possession of a John Sertaine; the homestead was near the east corner of Long Acre and Fisher Lane but the land holdings were scattered in strips throughout the open fields and meadows.

Although bovates were a notional rather than a fixed size and frequently varied in area, the average in Bingham has been calculated from the Survey data as between nine and eleven acres, therefore his eight bovates for both properties would suggest a total arable holding of approximately 70–90 acres. This figure is close to that estimated from the strips survey, which shows him owning 314

strips. Based on the average tenanted strip acreages for each furlong this would represent a figure of approximately 110 acres.

Stroud speculates that the five bovates ascribed to the secondary manors in Domesday might represent the five bovates of freehold land recorded as being owned by Porter in 1586, although she admits that this pre-supposes that a Domesday bovate was the same as a later one.³³ Although this is a tempting hypothesis some seventeen other bovates are also recorded in 1586 owned by some seven other freeholders so the total equivalent freeholds for the whole of Bingham would amount to twenty two, not five.

Robert Porter died shortly before 1590 when his estate was the subject of an *inquisition post mortem*, an indication that he was now regarded as a substantial property holder in his own right³⁴.

Despite building up their land holdings the family tried to keep their heads below the parapet during the early 17th century and the upheavals of the Civil War. At the heralds’ visitation of 1614 Robert Porter of Bingham was one of those ‘disclaimed’ as being no ‘gentleman’ at Nottingham market cross, no doubt to avoid the expense of purchasing a coat-of-arms essential to maintaining that rank.³⁵ Nevertheless he was wealthy enough to leave a bequest both to the parish church and to the poor of Bingham in his will drawn up in 1626.³⁶ By 1641 the head of the family was accorded the honorary status of ‘M[aste]r Porttar’ when he appeared second on the list of Bingham inhabitants who took the Oath of Protestation of loyalty to King Charles I.³⁷

At the 1662–4 heralds’ visitation Richard Porter was listed amongst those assuming the title of ‘gentleman’ without justification or attempting to purchase a coat-of-arms. Surprisingly Richard and Thomas Porter of Bingham were among several leading Presbyterians detained in custody in 1665 by the Lord Lieutenant fearful of a possible dissenters’ rising against the Crown.³⁸ In 1668 Thomas Porter of Bingham, gent., had licence to marry a sister of Robert Sherbrooke of Oxtou Hall near Southwell. Either he or a relation of the same name also married into the Shipman family who also owned a

small freehold estate in the neighbouring parish of Scarrington.³⁹ Both of these families were of similar status to their own. In 1677 Dr Thoroton mentioned Richard Porter as ‘the only considerable freeholder in the lordship’ of Bingham and the Hearth Tax returns of 1674 listed ‘Mr Porter’ with a six-hearth house.⁴⁰ Despite being tainted with nonconformity they had obviously by now entered the ranks of the minor gentry and lived in a substantial house. Significantly Robert Porter, Esquire, served as High Sheriff of the county in 1699, the traditional mode of ‘apprenticeship’ into county society. Robert, Richard and Henry Porter, Esquires, also served as county magistrates in 1700–03, 1734–47, and 1754–56 respectively⁴¹.

The Porter surname eventually died out in the mid 18th century after heiress Mary Porter married a cousin, Henry Sherbrooke of Oxton. When he died without male heirs in 1754 the combined Bingham and Oxton estates passed to Mary’s cousin Henry Porter of Bingham who had married their eldest daughter Margaret. He changed his name to Sherbrooke in order to inherit both.⁴²

The 1776 Chesterfield Survey indicates that the holdings of the successor to the Porter estate – Henry Sherbrooke – totalled 96a. in one compact block on the south side of the Grantham road. This almost certainly represents the late 17th C enclosure allotment made in lieu of his ancestor’s former strips, ie most of the estimated 70–110 acres mentioned above.

The Porters’ Residence : Bingham Hall

The Sherbrooke family had been squires of long standing in Oxton and it was natural that after 1754 the family should live in their grander house there. It is thus probable that around this date they abandoned the old Porter home in Bingham. The Bingham estate subsequently passed by descent through related families until apparently broken up and sold by the Lowes in c. 1800–20.

The Bingham house was taxed on six hearths in 1674, meaning that it had at least six major rooms with fireplaces. This made it the second largest in the town at a time when half of the 117 householders

only had a single fireplace.⁴³ An indication of the house’s location can be found in John Throsby’s *History of Nottinghamshire* published in 1797. He wrote about the former Porter estate in a footnote:

This estate, and family mansion, which stands at the end of Bingham, are in the occupation of Mr Hutchinson, a respectable grazier. These possessions descended in right line to Henry Sherbrooke, esq. of Oxton.⁴⁴

Wortley recounts local oral tradition that this mansion was known as Bingham Hall and stood ‘very near to the site of the present Hall Farm, at the corner of Crow Field’. She also quotes another account which claimed that ‘the hall was a large gabled three-storied building with lancet windows, some single like the west lancet window in Church, but not in such thickness of masonry, some of two or three light with mullions’.⁴⁵ This description may be somewhat fanciful, but if the building was indeed a decaying medieval or Tudor structure of predominantly timber-framed construction it might explain why it was demolished or left to rot rather than be leased out to a tenant farmer. In the 1776 Chesterfield estate survey John Hutchinson was the tenant of nearby Starnhill Farm; it is however quite likely that he also leased the nearby 96a. block of freehold closes from Henry Sherbrooke. The Hall had disappeared by 1835 as it does not appear on Sanderson’s map of that date (Fig. 2).

Perhaps the most significant statement is that by Esdaile who wrote in 1851 that ‘there is a remnant of old houses near this Close, *and many gone down since I knew it* (our italics)’, implying that some of the properties had collapsed within his lifetime.

CONCLUSION

The historical and physical evidence from Crow Close leads to the most likely conclusion that Crow Close was the nucleus of the Porter family’s estate and the site of their mansion, known by the 18th century as Bingham Hall. The house was probably abandoned following the Sherbrooke inheritance after 1754. The earthworks may therefore represent the foundations of the Hall – possibly of medieval or Tudor origin – with outbuildings and cottages of medieval to Georgian date.

It is even possible that the Porters had lived at different dates in both of two large buildings apparent on the archaeological survey maps. The southern one, which is intersected by a field boundary, might be an earlier medieval one; the northern one built later. Some if not all of the smaller rectangular structures may have been their estate buildings and the hollow ways were primarily estate roads. The main one leads west into Bingham town centre. The one running south leads directly to their 96a. block of freehold land south of Grantham Road. The one going north leads to the common grazing lands. The rectangular fields demarcated by ditched boundaries could have been their private enclosures.

Combining the archaeological and documentary evidence it would appear that the area now called Crow Close was originally part of a medieval arable open field. At some time before 1450 part of it was acquired by the Porter family, who built their family home and estate farm on it. This may have been in the years after the Black Death when much of the northern part of the parish fell into disuse. The estate was enlarged in c.1680–90 when the fields flanking the roads that can now be seen were laid out. Thus most, if not all, of the structures visible in Crow Close could be interpreted as being abandoned in the Georgian period, although it is highly likely that the Hall and some other buildings would have had medieval origins.

APPENDIX: ST HELEN'S CHAPEL AND THE MYTH OF 'ST JAMES' CHAPEL

Many local historians in the past have tried to locate a presumed medieval chapel of St James in Crow Close but all the evidence suggests that no such building ever existed. The argument is presented here.

The existence of a free-standing medieval chapel in Bingham dedicated to St Helen is well documented. Dedications to St Helen are often associated with former Roman activity, and it may be significant that the site is less than a mile from the Roman town of Margidunum.

In c. 1301 the lord of the manor, Sir Richard de Bingham, was granted permission by the king to found a private manorial chapel for the use of his family. This was duly licenced by the Archbishop of York in 1308 by which time it had presumably been built. Cantarists – priests to chant masses for the souls of the family – are recorded as being instituted to the chapel in 1398, 1414, and 1423.⁴⁶

Its site was on the brow of the slope in the angle of the modern Kirkhill/Chapel Lane and School Lane (Fig.7 : A). It was recorded in the manorial survey of 1586 as 'Chappell Close... in which remains the antique walls of the chapel formerly dedicated to St Helen'. The site is now occupied by an Edwardian house where building works in the 1970s revealed several burials just below floor

level, presumably of members of the de Bingham family or their successors.⁴⁷ The location is on the western edge of the town but strangely not adjacent to the medieval manor house as might be expected. The 1586 survey describes 'the site of the manor ... which is now in decay and ruinous' as occupying the north side of the Market Place, approximately 300 m from St Helen's (Fig.7 : B).

When all chapels and chantries were confiscated by the Crown during the Reformation the chapel of 'Saynte Elyns' together with the rents of its property endowments was valued by Henry VIII's commissioners in 1536.⁴⁸ It was apparently soon leased to the then lord of the manor, Sir Bryan Stapleton, as the Chantry Certificates of 1546–48 record that St Helen's was 'worthe in lands, tenements and annuities going out of the manor of Bingham parcel of the possessions of Sir Bryan Stapleton, 37s 4d'.⁴⁹

The next reference to a chapel is to be found in a grant by Queen Elizabeth of numerous other similar lands in several counties sold to two property speculators John Sonkye and Percival Gunson in 1575, all recorded in a long and extensive transaction on the Patent Rolls.⁵⁰ This confirmed that the Bingham lands had previously been leased to Brian Stapleton.

It is this entry which has been the cause of so much confusion as it does not mention St Helen's but refers instead to 'all that our close in Bingham in our said county of Nottingham in which [stood] the chapel now wholly robbed [?] called *St James Chapel*' (our italics)⁵¹. This reference was accurately quoted by Dr Robert Thoroton in his *Antiquities of Nottinghamshire* of 1677⁵² and was subsequently repeated by generations of later historians who made vain attempts to identify the whereabouts of another chapel. The earthworks in Crow Close made that a prime candidate for its location.

It was J T Godfrey in 1907 who first suggested that 'it seems probable that St James is here given in error for the chapel of St Helen', ie. it was a simple scribal error made by a royal clerk in London whilst copying out descriptions of numerous properties all over the country, and in fact there was no such building of that dedication.⁵³ Examination of the related evidence makes a compelling case for this.

A 'St James's' chapel does not appear in either the *Valor* or the Chantry Certificates, and it is inconceivable that Henry VIII's commissioners could have missed it. It is equally unlikely that St Helen's would have been omitted from the 1575 grant.

The reference to 'St James' chapel in the 1575 grant is followed immediately by an adjacent close called 'St Helens Close'. Also the valuation of the 'St James' property at 37s 4d agrees exactly with the valuation of St Helen's in both 1536 and 1546–48. Even more significantly the endowments of 'St James' include three cottages in Bingham, one near the church, and a half bovate of land in Car Colston. This accords with the description of St Helen's in the *Valor* of three messuages in Bingham, one near the church, and a bovate in Car Colston.⁵⁴

Overall the strength of the evidence appears overwhelming and we may assume that there was no such chapel of St James and it can confidently be excluded from any study of Crow Close.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Bingham Heritage Trails Association (BHTA) is grateful to the landowner, the Diocese of Southwell, and Mr E. Potts, the tenant farmer, for allowing access to Crow Close, and also to English Heritage for granting a licence to survey the Scheduled Monument.

BHTA is indebted to 3D Laser mapping for kindly donating the laser topographic survey of Crow Close. The interpretation of their data to produce a topographic map was undertaken by the late Chris Green. David and Angela Hibbit of GridNine Geophysics carried out the geophysical survey and produced a full report, overseen by David Strange-Walker of Trent & Peak Archaeology. David Knight, Head of Research at Trent & Peak Archaeology, gave considerable advice as to the interpretation of the combined geophysics/topography.

The authors wish to thank BHTA members Robin Aldworth and Geoff Ashton for their work in analysing the 1586 Survey and compiling the data and conjectural maps from it. Geoff Ashton spent many hours creating the maps and illustrations both for that project and for this paper. Valerie Henstock translated the Survey from medieval Latin. Neil Linford (English Heritage) and Dr David Crook read the paper and made helpful comments.

All the data including the GridNine report, are on the BHTA website http://www.binghamheritage.org.uk/history_of_settlement/crow_close/geophysical_surveys.php and reports have been lodged with English Heritage.

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